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ABSTRACT

Evaluation of a 3-year transition education program at the Pingelly School in Western Australia used data from 29 students and staff interviews, direct observation, and document analysis to compare 4 projects established to improve the employability of students (in particular, Aboriginal students and girls who were at highest risk of being early school leavers with poor employment prospects) and to develop viable businesses which could be transferred into the community. The first project was based on horticulture; the second (called Pinten) produced high quality tea towels, wall hangings, and placemats for the Australian tourist market; the third involved production of wooden toys; and the fourth was based on paper making and carpet collage. The report focuses on the Pinten project, presenting details of project origins, progress, and success; student perceptions of the project's usefulness and satisfaction, ownership, group cohesion and self-esteem; teacher reaction; role of the principal; and comparison to the other transition projects. Findings showed that the Pinten project generated high levels of student satisfaction with all aspects of the experience, teacher views ranged from conditional support to outright opposition, and there was significant reliance on the principal's enthusiasm and support. Evaluation results indicated that the remaining transition projects did not achieve the same positive outcome. (NEC)

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A CASE STUDY OF A COMMUNITY-BASED TRANSITION EDUCATION PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

In Australia, the needs of non-tertiary bound students have been the focus of a number of special initiatives funded by the Commonwealth Schools Commission. One such initiative, the Commonwealth-State Transition Education Programme was designed to help students prepare for work while completing their schooling.

In this paper, a particular transition education project is described and its effectiveness as an agent of whole-school improvement is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth-State Transition Education Programme began in 1980 as one of the Commonwealth government's Specific Purpose programmes. Transition Education was a programme designed to improve the employability of students, in particular those who were academically less able and likely to leave school before the end of Grade 12. The programme sought to expand the education and training options for young people so that unemployment would be the least desirable option. While the guidelines were subsequently revised to include a focus on whole-school improvement, the emphasis on enhancing student employability remained. To achieve these goals the Commonwealth made available significant sums of money to foster school-based initiatives.

In 1983, in an attempt to assess the effectiveness of the Transition Education Programme in promoting change in schools, the Education Department of Western Australia commissioned three case studies of transition education projects which had been conducted in local High Schools. The Pinten Project which is described in this paper is one of three case studies undertaken by staff of the Faculty of Education at the Western Australian Institute of Technology.

THE PINTEN PROJECT

Pinten, which is a contraction of the town's name, Pingelly and the year level of the student group involved, Year Ten, was the name given

to the Transition Education Programme undertaken by the Pingelly School in 1982. The Pinten Project, which was a school-based screen-printing activity, was established with the intention of not only developing specific vocational skills but also of building a viable business which could be transferred into the community and become self supporting. The business, which was eventually registered as Pinten Enterprises, produced high quality tea towels, wall hangings and placemats for the Australian tourist market.

The Pinten Project and its objectives were described in a number of reports and grant applications written by the Principal of the School (for example, Hayden, 1981). In all of these statements there is a recurring theme of concern for early school leavers who have poor employment prospects. In particular, emphasis was placed on the needs of Aboriginal students and girls, who were seen as the highest 'at risk' group in the community. The statements also indicated that, while Pinten Enterprises was designed to cater mainly for school leavers, it was also intended to provide work for women in the community through the provision of paid piece-work activities in sewing and screen-printing.

PINGELLY -- THE TOWN, THE COMMUNITY AND THE SCHOOL

Pingelly is a conservative wheat and sheep farming community located 100 miles south west of Perth in what is called the Upper Great Southern district of Western Australia. The Pingelly shire is approximately 25 miles by 20 miles in area and has a total population of 1400 people, 900 or so of whom live in the town of Pingelly. A significant proportion of the town's residents is Aboriginal and

in the past Pingelly has attracted media attention because of the racial conflict which has occurred there.

The town and district are well served in terms of public facilities which include a modern 37-bed hospital, extensive sporting facilities and a District High School in which the present study was undertaken.

Like many farming communities in Western Australia, Pingelly has suffered a decline in population over the past 40 to 50 years. In the 1930s the depression forced many people off the land and in the 1970s, drought and the low wool prices again resulted in a drift of the rural population to the city. In the 1980s, Pingelly found itself with unemployment at critical levels as farms were consolidated into larger holdings and the number of businesses in the town declined. The highest levels of unemployment were among the female and Aboriginal populations, with female Aboriginals being the group with the highest unemployment rate.

The Western Australian education system provides 7 years of primary schooling followed by 5 years of secondary schooling, the last two years of which are not compulsory. The school at Pingelly, like all Western Australian District High Schools, offers an educational programme from pre-primary to Grade 10. Students wishing to enter tertiary institutions must leave Pingelly and undertake Grade 11 and 12 studies at either a Senior High School, an Agricultural College, or, as often happens, at a private school in Perth. The Pingelly school has a student population of 390, approximately 100 of whom are Aboriginal and a teaching staff, including the Principal, of 25.

INFORMATION GATHERING METHODOLOGY

The Pinten Project was the second in a series of four transition education projects undertaken by the Pingelly school over the period 1981-1984. The first project was based on horticulture, the second was Pinten, the third involved the production of wooden toys and the fourth was based on paper making and carpet collage. The duration of the study, which required a series of site visits during 1983 and 1984, enabled comparisons to be made between Pinten and the projects which followed it.

The major data gathering approach used was the interview. This was supplemented with information derived from a variety of sources (eg, direct observation, document analysis). Rather than a tightly structured series of questions a more open approach was used whereby a series of key questions was embedded within a more free flowing interview.

In an effort to reduce reactive bias, one of the two investigators conducted the interview and the other recorded the answers in note form. At the end of the interview or as soon after as possible, both investigators met to audio-record their perceptions of what had been said and to confirm the accuracy of the interviewees' comments based on the notes which had been taken. Once this had been completed the investigators discussed the interview and recorded any other relevant information.

Twenty nine people were interviewed in the study. This number included the Principal and the two key teachers involved in the Pinten Project, seven of the thirteen Pinten students, three of the six students involved in wooden toy production and five of the ten students engaged in paper making and carpet collage. In addition, five community members and six other teachers who had either been at the school when the Pinten project was in operation or had been involved subsequently with other transition projects were also interviewed.

HISTORY OF THE TRANSITION EDUCATION PROJECT; PINTEN ENTERPRISES

Origins of the Project

The Principal took up her appointment at the school in January 1981. As the first female Principal in the school's history, she brought to the position a deep concern for the needs of women, and of early school leavers, particularly Aboriginal girls. In August 1981, in an effort to enlist community support for a transition education programme, the Principal organised a day-long seminar on the topic of school leaver unemployment. More than 50 people attended the seminar which was addressed by Parliamentarians, Education Department officials and prominent members of the Pingelly community. The seminar was a key factor in enlisting initial community support for the transition education programme and later it played a significant part in the establishment of what was to become Pinten Enterprises.

In November 1981 the decision was taken to offer a transition education programme to those students who did not wish to continue their schooling beyond Grade 10. The programme was to be based on the production of screen printed tea towels and in February 1982 twelve students were enrolled in the course which became known as Pinten.

THE PROGRESS AND SUCCESS OF PINTEN

From a business perspective and from the standpoint of the students who were involved in it, the Pinten Project can only be described as a resounding success. By the end of 1981 Pinten Enterprises was producing a wide variety of high quality screen printed tea towels, wall hangings and table napkins for local and interstate markets. The students had been to Perth to find retail outlets for their products; the assistance of a professional designer had been sought and the tea towels, as an Art Form, had won prizes at a local fair. At the point where the business was transferred to the community, Pinten Enterprises was showing a credit balance of $1500 with a turnover of $1000 a month and the mothers of two students, one European and one Aboriginal were employed full-time together with a number of other community members who participated on a part-time and piece-work basis. To cap a year of success, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation produced and screened a television feature on the project.

PINTEN AND THE STUDENTS

From our observations and the interviews there emerged very quickly a remarkably consistent picture of academically weak students entering a

programme which engendered a powerful sense of group cohesion, a strong sense of project ownership and a positive change in self esteem. Student perceptions of their Pinten experiences were, in all but one instance, uniformly positive. In the case where some reservations were expressed these were largely outweighed by the positive aspects described.

Student perceptions of Pinten clustered around four dimensions: usefulness and satisfaction, project ownership, group cohesion, and self esteem.

(i) Usefulness and satisfaction

All of the students who were interviewed regarded Pinten as the most useful and enjoyable "subject" in their school week. The strength of this feeling was made obvious by the promptness of student responses and was well illustrated by one of the Aboriginal boys whose career aspiration was to play league football. Like one of his friends, he hoped to go to Perth and play football and it was our expectation that he would rate sport most highly in the school curriculum. This was not the case, and when probed on his response he confirmed that the transition education programme was the most useful and enjoyable subject of the school week.

The reasons given for usefulness varied from student to student. Some students expressed the view that the Pinten Project was ideal for school leavers in that the varied experiences which they had, namely,

bookkeeping, designing, printing and wood-work, provided valuable skills which would assist them to get a job. One student suggested that it was enjoyable because "there was always something to do". All students had something positive to say on the programme's usefulness. Generally speaking the students believed that the teachers liked the Pinten Project, were in favour of it and supported what the students were doing.

It would not have been surprising if there had been some student dissatisfaction with the transition education activities and to explore this possibility students were asked what they would do to improve the transition education programme. The students expressed a remarkably consistent view which indicated general satisfaction with the programme and little, or no, wish to change it in any significant way. Several students were emphatic that no change should be made, while others indicated that there was a need to improve the facilities so that Pinten did not have to compete for space with other school activities. It is interesting to note that all students felt that there was no need to change the nature of the programme.

The students reported a somewhat mixed view of where the ideas for Pinten's activity originated. Some of the students thought that the ideas came from the 'kids' themselves, however, most agreed that the home economics teacher, the principal, and the manual arts teacher all played significant roles in the development of the activities. The principal was mentioned on many occasions as one of the people who took a great interest in the students and the programme.

(ii) Project Ownership

The sense of ownership of the programme was well illustrated for us when we questioned students on whether or not they thought Pinten should be repeated each year. Most students felt that it should not and when pressed as to why, one student replied "because it was our programme".

Our file note of the interview with this student conveys the impression which we gathered from all students:

> in response to the question on whether or not she thought that Pinten should have been continued as a transition education programme this year her emphatic response was that it shouldn't and when we asked why she said simply 'because it was our programme'. The sense of ownership was very high indeed as was her defence of the programme and the feeling that we gained of her very strong commitment to it. The responses given to us by this student supported those of other students.

Some of the excitement and enthusiasm surrounding the programme from the point of view of participants is captured in the school newsletter of the 14/10/82:

> Mrs Gibson, Mr Kaniecki and the year 10 students involved in Pinten were all excited about their latest achievement. They entered the York Fair design competition for Tea-towels as an Art-Form on a joint entry with Naomi Mills. The kangaroo design in their range won first prize. Orders for these are flooding in from all over the state and some from interstate as well. The Save the Children design is also being produced by the hundred. They all deserve their success as anyone who comes to see them working here agrees.

(iii) Group Cohesion

There was a common response to questions which sought to assess group cohesion. Typically, we were told that while some of the students were reluctant to join the group at the beginning of the year, this changed when the nature of the transition education programme became apparent. It was at this point that a number of other students sought entry to the programme but with only two exceptions were not allowed to do so! One female student reported that before the Pinten activity the social relationships in the classroom were poor and that there were few cross-racial group friendships. In her words, "we didn't get on well in class". However, once Pinten was underway "there was much more mixing and the students got on well together".

(iv) Self-Esteem

In discussion with the students it was apparent that for some their aspirations had been raised substantially as a direct result of their experiences in Pinten. One asserted that "Involvement in Pinten has kept me interested in school and made me want to go on and do my TAE", [ie, Tertiary Admissions Examination]. Several students told us how they had decided to go on to Grade 11 at a Senior High School in a nearby town as a result of their involvement in Pinten. This brought sharply into focus one of the problems for these students since they did not have the type of academic background which was needed for the successful completion of Grade 11 and Grade 12. One student in particular was thinking of repeating Grade 10 to enable him to acquire the subjects which would eventually be necessary for

entry to a tertiary institution in Perth. All of the students reported that they had been successful in Pinten.

One of the teachers first involved with Pinten described how the transition education scheme gave the students "a lot of standing within the school". This prestige was reinforced on the Annual School Speech Day when, after the award had been made to the Dux of the school, all of the students in the Pinten Project were brought on to the dais and presented with a commemorative pack of screen-printed materials. This presentation was to the very loud applause from all present. The teacher reported that for many of the Pinten students this was the first successful school activity in which they had engaged. It was her view that once they had experienced the success they were willing to risk other activities because "....if you have achieved once you can achieve again".

It was obvious from our discussions that many of the teachers' comments supported the statements made by the students. Overall, the teachers indicated that the Pinten students were a highly cohesive group and it was noticeable how much more positively the students viewed themselves as a result of the transition education experience. The teachers made comments such as:

- For most of their school careers these kids would not have interacted directly with the principal. In Pat's [the Principal] case she came down from her ivory tower.
- It gave them something they had never had before - it gave these children a lot of standing in the school.

- For most of them it would have been the first successful achievement of their career.
- It gave students a chance to develop an identity.
- Every school should have such a scheme because it provides the opportunity to build the self-esteem of students.

PINTEN AND THE TEACHERS

Students who participated in Pinten were enthusiastic in their support of the project. The teachers, on the other hand, while acknowledging the benefit to the students involved, held views of the project which ranged from conditional support, through neutrality or "it's all right for some kids", to outright opposition. It became clear that as the Pinten project gathered momentum and attracted statewide publicity, there developed among teachers a degree of resentment over the amount of time, resources and general attention devoted to the project.

One teacher when reflecting on different aspects of the programme talked about the very large amount of the school area given over to the screen printing activities. When asked where Pinten was located, he waved his arms and said "everywhere". In his words "the place was wall to wall with tea towels". This impression was confirmed by another teacher who indicated that at the height of the screen printing activities the school developed the nickname "The Tea Towel Factory".

It was perhaps inevitable that the resources provided for the project, including two teachers for a dozen or so students, money to purchase materials, a trip to Perth for the students and so on, would

become a source of friction between the project team and the rest of the school. One teacher described the tensions which developed in the following way:

> In 1982 there were some tensions between the teachers in the primary school and those connected with the transition education programme. Primary school teachers ran out of paper for the children to use but at the same time they saw transition education with a lot money. It was realized that they were being resourced on a different basis but there was tension between groups of teachers who saw transition education seemingly being able to do what it wanted and students in the primary school who didn't have the resources to work with.

Another teacher who reported the enthusiastic acceptance of the programme in its initial stages described the resistance which developed as the year progressed:

> Eventually, however, everyone was heartily sick of it. To those who wished to disparage the work that was going on, the school became known as the "Tea Towel Factory". The only news that ever seemed to come out of the school related to the Transition Education Programme. The screen printing activities seemed to take over the whole school. Wherever you went there seemed to be tea towels of one sort or another and it affected the staff in that they became very resentful of it. Questions were raised as to why a handful of high school children were getting all the publicity and attention and some staff members were wondering whether or not the work they did in a quiet and less obtrusive way was appreciated.

A teacher who was directly involved in the Pinten Project readily acknowledged the problem which developed and, in fact, highlighted another:

> The primary school staff were unable to see what we were trying to do. It was an educational exercise that ran away with us!

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL IN PINTEN

In many respects it is likely that there wouldn't have been a transition education programme in Pingelly without the drive and enthusiasm of the Principal. She was clearly the dynamic element which gave shape and impetus to the Pinten project. In discussion with the Principal it was evident that she had a long-held interest in grappling with the problems which arose from acts of sexism and racism and she saw Pinten as an ideal way to counter the sexist and racist attitudes and behaviour which existed in many communities. It was the Principal's vision and enthusiasm, her commitment to the ideal of assisting the most disadvantaged groups in the community, her skill in attracting resources and her gift for making things happen that were the key elements in the success of the Pinten project. In addition, the Principal chose staff whom she thought could assist in the achievement of her goals and together they were responsible for the unique programme which developed.

The significance of the Principal's involvement was recognised by staff, students and community members alike. One respondent characterised the Principal's contribution to the project in terms of local community dynamics. She claimed that the Principal "was in a unique position when she arrived in this town. She was not bound by the traditions of the small rural community". This respondent suggested that only a person from outside the town could effect such an innovation as "most people in the town are fairly complacent, they don't get involved and just get on with their own lives". Another teacher attributed the success of Pinten to the Principal because "you

need to have someone like the Principal to push the project in the school and in the community". It was also suggested that the Principal was the ideal person to implement a transition education project because she was "...someone to start off with in a situation like this because she had the enthusiasm to make it succeed."

It has to be acknowledged, however, that there were critical comments made of the Principal and the Pinten Project from within the school and the local community. One respondent indicated that the Principal's intentions and aspirations for the Pinten Project were not always clear to the staff of the school or to members of the wider community. A number of respondents observed that the focus of Pinten seemed to be upon women and Aboriginals and that other students in the school were not getting enough attention. The Principal reported that one teacher had told her "you don't care about the rest of the school and you give your whole attention to Pinten".

One teacher suggested that the way in which the innovation had been introduced was "somewhat abrupt". The groundwork which had been laid in the school-community seminar and the general discussions surrounding transition education in the school had little relevance to some staff. As this teacher explained:

> The whole matter of transition education had meant little to them (the teachers)... they couldn't see any rationale behind it...it turned out to be a problem of communication between the Principal and the staff.

Another interviewee suggested that the personality of the Principal may have contributed to the unsettled relations which developed with

some of the teachers and some members of the wider community. It was stated that "she [the Principal] trod on a lot of toes"; another observed that the Principal "would strike sparks off an elephant". On the other hand, the same person emphasised that "Pinten would not have evolved had it not been for the Principal and her particular personality, vision and drive".

The conflict which arose in 1982 led to a reduction in emphasis on the transition education programmes for 1983 and 1984. It was the investigators' perception that while the Principal continued to be committed to the transition education programmes and devote considerable energy to them, her absence on Long Service Leave in the second half of 1983 and her reduced involvement in 1984 influenced the student outcomes of transition education in these years.

PINTEN AND OTHER TRANSITION EDUCATION PROJECTS AT PINGELLY

In 1983 the focus of the school's transition education activities shifted from screen printing to the production of wooden toys. Unlike the Pinten students, these students reported limited enthusiasm for the transition education programme and terms such as "all right" and "O.K." were typical of the opinions expressed of the value of the toy-making activities. When asked to describe the best features of the transition education programme, students tended to agree that it

was their visit to Perth and, when reflecting on the deficiencies of the programmes, such comments as "just waiting around" and "it is too boring" were common.

Teachers' perceptions of the 1983 transition education programme tended to mirror those of the students. The view of several teachers was summed up in the following way "the kids don't get much out of transition education, at least they didn't this year... teachers are happy to get kids out of class, so that they are able to do more work with more able kids."

A similar lack of interest was found among students in the 1984 papermaking and carpet collage group. Of the seven students interviewed not one rated transition education as their most enjoyable subject and in only one case did a student suggest that more time should be devoted to transition education. Students indicated that there wasn't much work in transition education and "it gets boring doing the same thing all the time". It is also noteworthy that all but one student felt that the transition education programme would not enhance their job prospects.

In terms of the status of transition education it became obvious that, unlike the Pinten students who saw themselves as " the top group", students engaged in the 1983 and 1984 programmes saw transition education as a way of getting out of the more rigorous academic subjects. Perhaps the two most significant responses from students, which reflected the decline in the status of transition education were, "they pick you to go into it, nearly all of the 'basics' are in

it...we need it, they reckon, the others don't need it as much", and "my friend wanted to come into 'Trans. Ed.' but she wasn't allowed; she had too many A's."

SUMMARY: SOME JUDGEMENTS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE TRANSITION EDUCATION PROJECTS

At the conclusion of the discussions with the staff and students involved in the 1982, 1983 and 1984 transition education schemes, it was evident that the 1982 scheme, Pinten Enterprises, was unique in terms of the positive impact it had on the students who were involved in it. The Pinten project generated high self esteem and a sense of personal worth in the students, together with pronounced group cohesion and a high level of satisfaction with all aspects of the transition education experience. The Pinten group regarded themselves, and were regarded by others, as "the top group."

In discussions with those involved in the 1983 and 1984 schemes, it appeared that these transition education activities did not achieve the same positive outcomes. Indeed, we formed the impression that as a result of the tensions which arose in 1982 there was a deliberate decision to reduce the prominence of the transition education activities within the school in subsequent years. In 1983 a teacher was appointed to the transition education scheme after the decisions were made on the nature of the activities which were to be undertaken. Thus, the sense of project ownership which was so evident in Pinten staff was not a feature of the 1983 programme. Also in 1983, there was a decline in group cohesion and in student enthusiasm for the transition education activities in which they were engaged.

In no way could it be said that these students saw themselves as "the top group".

Coincident with the enthusiasm generated in 1982 and the decline to lack of interest which was evident in 1984, there was, paradoxically, a decline and then a general rise in school acceptance of the transition education activities. At its most successful point, towards the latter part of 1982, the Pinten project produced a strong sense of resentment both within the school and to some extent within the wider community. As the success of Pinten declined and subsequent transition education schemes diminished in prominence, it appeared that their acceptance as a legitimate activity within the school increased.

The reason for the increased acceptance among school staff seems to have had its roots in the benefits which accrued from having the less academically able students removed from the core subject classes. An expressed view among the teachers to whom we spoke was that the 1983 and 1984 transition education schemes had the effect of "syphoning off" the weaker students leaving a more homogeneous group to deal with in the core subjects. While this might be regarded as a positive benefit for the teachers, there was little perceived benefit for the students.

EPILOGUE

At the height of its success in 1983 the screen printing activity of Pinten Enterprises reportedly employed up to 17 people, at least two

of whom were full-time. At the time of our final visit in June 1984 the business was without a manager and the screen printing had been suspended. It was explained that problems had been encountered with quality control of the tea towels and those which had been produced in 1984 were not of the standard required. We were also told that the screens had been returned to the designer for checking.

More importantly, however, it seemed to us that Pinten Enterprises had reached a crossroad in terms of its future management and direction. At issue were fundamental questions of long term survival, ownership and management, philosophy and control, and interwoven with all of these was the question of how the business was to be placed on a stable financial footing. As one of the community members explained:

> Pinten when it started was white and black people working together, but now it is being seen as black only...it shouldn't be this way.
>
> In Pinten we had white and black women working together and this is where I saw a breaking down of some of the barriers in this community.
>
> It will be a terrible thing if Pinten fails because it offered some hope for the community.

The emergence of these problems may have been foreseen in some of the statements made during the planning phase of the Pinten project. In one of her earlier reports for example, the Principal described a project being undertaken in another part of Australia.

> Since the emphasis is on self help and self employment the industry does have problems endemic to any enterprise where the emphasis is on slow development, on self confidence and improved self concept and where white management and initiative cannot be allowed to dominate the situation. (emphasis added)

Quite clearly there are many issues which will have to be resolved if Pinten Enterprises is to be:

> ...a programme which will not only help the students in our school, whom we know to be deserving of employment and a satisfying lifestyle, but which will encourage the community in Pingelly and others with similar problems to address the problems themselves and to discover that local enterprise can generate solutions. (Hayden, 1981)

At last report, the Principal had resigned from the Education Department of Western Australia and had left Pingelly to work more directly with Aboriginal people. The control of Pinten Enterprises had passed to the Aboriginal community in Pingelly.

NOTES

1. The work described in this paper was supported by the Education Department of Western Australia through its Transition Education Research and Evaluation Committee.

2. This case study forms part of a larger study of several transition education projects with implication for school change. Information about the final report of the study may be requested from the authors.

Reference

Hayden, P. (1981). Report of Visit to the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales.